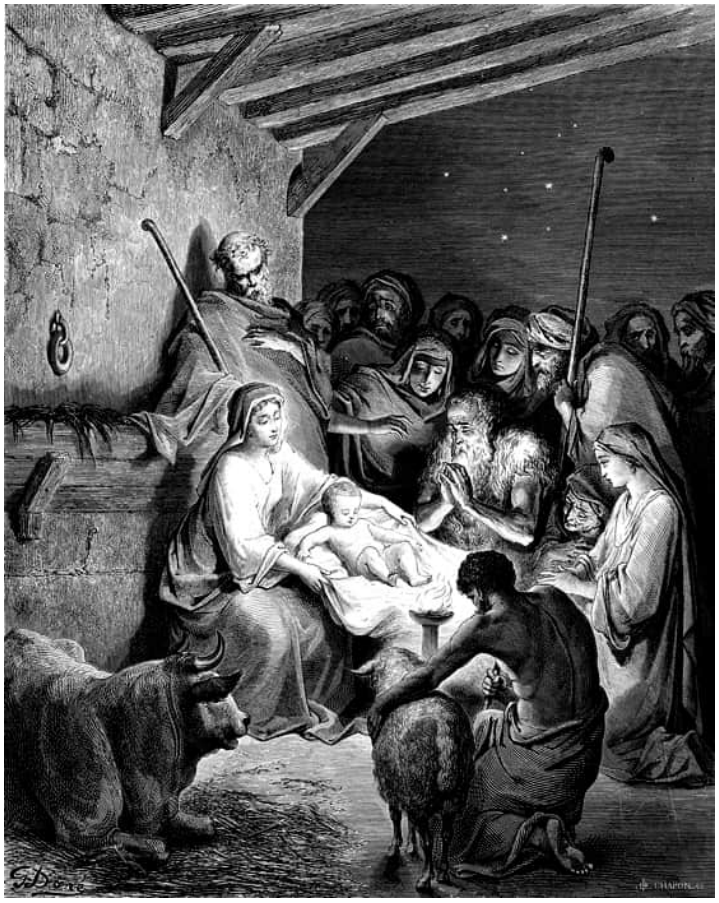

*The Nativity* by Gustave Doré, 1865

# The Nativity of Jesus: Commentary on the Accounts of Luke and Matthew

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# The Gospel According to Luke (1-2:40)

Most of us have celebrated enough Christmas seasons and seen enough Nativity pageants to feel that we are reasonably well-acquainted with the story of Jesus' birth. Each year as we approach the Nativity season, certain traditional images come into our minds.

For example, we tend to think of a nasty old innkeeper, who callously barred the door of his inn to Mary and Joseph. We picture certain shepherds in Bethlehem's field, as being tender and noble souls, as gentle as their flocks. We think of the heavenly host over Bethlehem, as a chorus of winged angels, mostly young women, who wore halos much like crowns. And we imagine that along with those shepherds there were three kings at the manager on the night of Jesus' birth.

Such traditional images of the Christmas story are very familiar to us. But let's ask this question. Are such familiar images really to be found in the first Christmas? Or are they more like "flights of fancy" that have crept into our Christmas celebrations over the centuries?

In this essay we'll go on a journey. Forgetting our modern images of the first Christmas, including our modern Nativity pageants, we'll go back to review the ancient accounts of Jesus' birth that appear in our Holy Bible. As we look at those early Christian documents, may we develop a better understanding and appreciation of the first Christmas. May we also discover a deeper joy in our faith lives, as we reflect upon God's greatest gift to us, the gift of God's son, our world's Lord and Savior.

Our sources concerning Jesus' birth are extremely limited. Through the entire New Testament only two books have anything to say about that birth. Those two books are the *Gospel According to Luke* and the *Gospel According to Matthew*. The Apostle Paul in his letters tells us nothing about Jesus' birth. Our earliest Gospel, the *Gospel According to Mark*, begins its account with Jesus' baptism as an adult. In fact, Mark's Gospel is so unconcerned with Jesus' earlier years that it doesn't even give us the name of Jesus' father. Also, the *Gospel According to John*, which is often considered the latest of the four Gospels, mentions neither the Nativity nor the name of Jesus' mother.

Apparently many early Christians were less concerned about Jesus' birth than they were about his ministry, death, and resurrection. Either that or, as may be more likely, they were not familiar with any traditions concerning Jesus' birth. We must remember that in the earliest days of Christianity, word of mouth, such as through preaching, was the predominant means of conveying and learning about the Gospel message. And different early Christian groups often had access to different traditions concerning the details of Jesus' life. As evidence of that, we need only point to the fact that our Bible has not one, but four Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry. And each of those Gospels has its own distinctive characteristics.

We will start with the Lucan story of the Nativity, then consider the Matthean story. We will review those accounts using the text from the English translation of the Holy Bible known as the New Revised Standard Version [NRSV], which was copyrighted in 1989. This commentary has been written to be read in conjunction with the biblical texts referred to in each section.

In telling the story of Jesus' birth, Luke and Matthew both agree on numerous important points. Specifically, they agree that:

–Jesus really existed as an historic figure.

–Jesus truly was the son of God, who came into our world in accordance with God's great plan of salvation.

–Jesus was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, foretold by the ancient Jewish prophets.

–Jesus was born in Bethlehem to a woman named Mary, who was both engaged to a man named Joseph and a virgin at the time of the miraculous conception of her son Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

--Jesus' descent can be traced back to the great Hebrew King David in some sense, either through bloodline or legally.

Beyond those important points, we will see that there are also a number of differences between those two stories. But none of those differences is so important that it can undermine our basic belief in the truth and profound significance of Jesus' birth, God's Christmas miracle. In fact, we may be grateful for the different perspectives those two Gospel writers have on that event. For through their differences we can begin to glimpse the great richness and deep meaning inherent in that wonderful, but ultimately mysterious act of God's providence and love for us.

Who was Luke? Early Christian tradition claimed that he was a physician who accompanied the Apostle Paul on some of his missionary journeys. According to modern scholars, it's likely that early tradition was correct. In all likelihood, Luke was a second generation Christian. He did not directly witness Jesus' ministry and neither did the Apostle Paul, for that matter. But Luke probably had access to at least a few individuals who had come in direct contact with the earthly Jesus.

It is important to note that many scholars believe Luke was a Gentile, not a Jew. All the New Testament Gospel authors wrote their Gospels in Greek. Of those authors, Luke is said to have had the best command of the Greek language. It is obvious from Luke's writings that he had a deep respect for the Jewish faith. He was relatively well-versed in the Old Testament in its Greek translation, called the Septuagint, and in the ways of the synagogue. He fully believed that the coming of Jesus was the fulfillment of all the ancient Jewish hopes. And, as has often been noted, Luke's Nativity story is heavily Jewish in flavor.

It's important to realize that Luke's view of salvation was a very broad one. Despite Luke's great respect for Judaism, his ultimate goal was to show that Jesus came as the Savior of the entire world, not just of the Hebrew people alone. It's worth noting that in tracing Jesus' genealogy, the *Gospel According to Matthew* traced it only as far back as Abraham, the father of

the Hebrews [Matthew 1:1-7]. In contrast, Luke traced Jesus' lineage all the way back to Adam, the supposed father of all the world's people, including both Jews and Gentiles [Luke 3:23-38].

Scholars believe that Luke was actually responsible for writing two books in our New Testament, both the *Gospel According to Luke* and the book entitled *The Acts of the Apostles*. Together, Luke and Acts make up a two-volume set on early Christianity. According to estimates, Luke wrote his Gospel sometime between 80-100 AD. That was some fifty to seventy years after the death of Jesus.

What were Luke's sources? It is easy to see that a significant portion of Luke's Gospel is taken virtually verbatim from the *Gospel According to Mark*, which likely was compiled in the period from 65-70 AD. The *Gospel According to Matthew* also borrowed heavily from Mark. But beyond Luke's dependence on Mark's Gospel, Luke apparently had access to other written and oral traditions about the life of Jesus. Some of those other traditions are found only in Luke's Gospel and not in the other New Testament books.

There is one thing we should be clear about. Like all the New Testament Gospels, the *Gospel According to Luke* is not an objective, strictly factual, historical report. Rather, it is basically a document of faith, which seeks to proclaim the mighty acts of God in human history. The emphasis in Luke is less on reporting precise historic details and more on revealing the divine spiritual truths believed to have been operating within historic events. That emphasis is found in all the Gospels. But it is especially found in the Gospel Nativity stories. For in addition to being based on a stratum of historic truth, those Nativity stories are richly embellished with poetry, symbolic images, and passages taken directly from the Hebrew Bible, which we Christians often refer to as the Old Testament.

It's important for us to use our common sense when we come to these Nativity stories. We shouldn't press them too hard for literal, word-for-word historical accuracy. For if we stop to think about it, many of the events depicted in these stories were actually very private affairs for which there were few, if any, corroborating witnesses.

Consider, for example, Mary's encounter with the Angel Gabriel, when she is told she will bear a child to be named "Jesus" and she responds to that news with the speech called the "Magnificat." Given the lack of other witnesses and Mary's perplexity in hearing the angel's surprising news, it seems likely that the only way Luke could have gotten a completely accurate word-for-word description of that encounter was if Mary had recorded those moments on a tape recorder. Of course, that is absurd, not to mention anachronistic. In fact, as scholars have shown, all the extended monologues in Luke's Nativity story, including Mary's great "Magnificat," are actually compilations of Old Testament passages or early Christian hymns which Luke carefully fitted into his telling of his Nativity story.

There are two additional reasons why we should not press those Nativity stories too hard for complete accuracy. First, it is not known to what extent Mary and the other persons involved

in Jesus' birth passed along their knowledge of that event. Second, it seems very likely that Jesus' birth only became important to some of his followers, after the fact of his death and resurrection. And, at that later point in time, people's memories of the precise details of that birth event may have begun to fade.

It seems to be much the same with any person who becomes famous in their later years. For example, it was only after Jack Kennedy became President or was assassinated, that many people really became interested in discovering the details of his early life. And quite possibly, those details recalled at such a later date may have been colored by the awareness of Kennedy's later significance.

What faith proclamation was Luke trying to make in telling the story of Jesus' birth as he did? There are several that could be mentioned. But I will focus on this central proclamation. Luke wanted to show that God had a divine plan by which God was accomplishing the world's salvation. Luke wanted his readers to understand that this divine plan had entered its most significant phase with the birth of Jesus into our world.

Luke seems to have envisioned a simple, two-tiered universe. First, there was the level of human history. That was the level in which the ordinary affairs of human beings took place. Second, there was the level of the great spiritual reality of God. Those two levels were usually quite separate from each other. Yet, as Luke believed, God had taken the initiative many times in the past to enter the level of ordinary human history.

In fact, that was the primary reason why Luke, a Gentile, valued the Old Testament [Hebrew Bible] so highly. He saw the Old Testament as being the essential record of God's repeated entrances into human history. Luke saw the Hebrew Bible as containing the essential record of all God's previous efforts in our world to prepare human hearts for the eventual unfolding of God's great salvation plan. In Luke's view, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, and all the other people of the Old Testament were important early actors on the earthly stage of God's great salvation drama.

Make no mistake about it. In Luke's view, God's divine plan was irresistible. It was a plan that would take millennia to reach its conclusion. But it was not a plan that could be thwarted by any human being, not even a figure like Judas. Throughout Luke's biblical writings, human beings are free to respond to God's intervention in their lives as they see fit. They are not mere puppets to fate. However, as Luke believed, the plot of this drama ultimately belongs to God. Thus, Luke was certain that one way or another, with or without conscious human cooperation, God's divine plan of salvation would be fulfilled in human history.

According to Luke, God even used Caesar Augustus' call for a census as a means to accomplish God's holy purpose. As Luke tells the story, it was that completely secular, bureaucratic act of the Roman state which brought Joseph and Mary to the small, but historic town of Bethlehem. According to Luke, Caesar Augustus–unwittingly, to be sure–became God's

instrument to bring that couple to the very place where ancient Jewish prophecy had long said the Jewish Messiah would be born.

As you will note in Luke's Nativity story, the leading of God's spirit is referred to repeatedly. It was Luke's belief that God was ever at work creating the circumstances which would usher the Christ into our earthly realm. And to Luke, the coming of Christ was the fulfillment of all the human hopes and promises of God which were revealed in the earlier days of the Old Testament.

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## Luke 1:1-4

The Theophilus mentioned in verse 3 was probably a Roman official. As this Gospel was written at a time when Christians were being harshly persecuted by Rome, it is likely that Luke had two immediate reasons for writing it. First, Luke wanted to impress this official with the great spiritual and ethical value of Christianity. Second, Luke wanted to show this official that as an outgrowth of traditional Judaism, Christianity is a religion quite worthy of Roman respect. At this particular time in history, the Roman government was very tolerant of Judaism. Luke seeks a similar consideration for Christians.

It has been said that of all the New Testament books, the works of Luke are the only ones written specifically for distribution outside the fellowship of Christians–Jews and Gentiles. Likely Theophilus was just one of many Romans eager to receive an accounting of this new religion, which was creating such a stir in the Empire. You will notice in this passage that Luke does not claim that he himself was an eye-witness of Jesus' ministry. Rather, Luke describes himself as a compiler, as one who will write an orderly account, blending together the traditions he has received from various sources.

## Luke 1:5-10

Notice where Luke's Nativity story begins. It begins in the great Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, at the heart of the Judaism of Jesus' day. That is very significant. As we will see later, according to Luke the Jewish Temple is also the place where the Nativity story ends. But not only that. Luke's entire Gospel ends with the disciples in Jerusalem's great Temple, blessing God for the miracle of Jesus' resurrection [Luke 24:53]. Make no mistake about it. To Luke the spiritual richness of Judaism is the context in which God performed this great new act in God's divine plan for the world's salvation. We modern Christians often tend to overlook the Jewish roots of our faith. But even as a non-Jew, Luke had a profound respect for those roots.

Notice Zechariah and Elizabeth. If you will think back to the Old Testament you will see that this couple is strongly reminiscent of Abraham and Sarah. Both couples had similar life circumstances. Like the ancient Jewess Sarah, this Elizabeth is both old and unable to conceive a

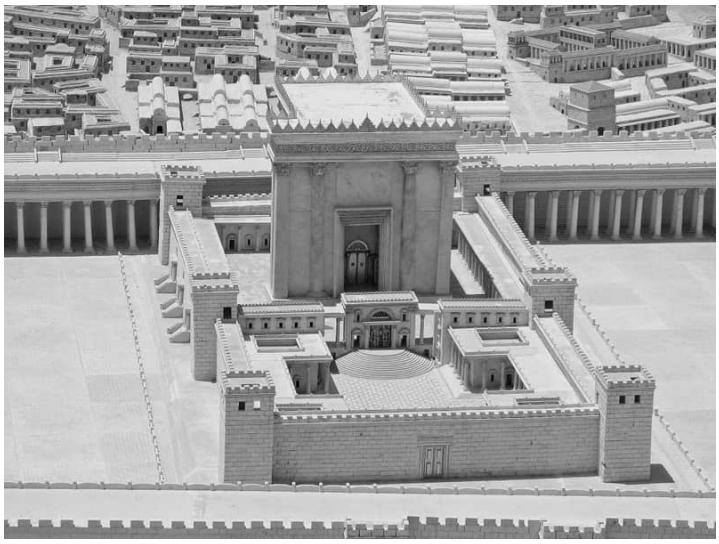
child. For both of these women, their barrenness is considered to be a mark of great shame.

Zechariah is a descendent of Abijah. As such, Zechariah is one of a large number of priests who were expected to perform numerous duties in the Temple, on a rotating shift two weeks out of every year. In fact, Luke is telling us that this is the highest moment of Zechariah's life as a servant of God. For Zechariah has been chosen by lot to burn the Temple incense as a symbol of the people's prayers ascending to God.

You should know that this privilege of burning the incense could only happen once in a priest's life. And many priests, through their entire lives, were never fortunate enough to be chosen for this most sacred duty. But on this day, Zechariah has been greatly favored. We cannot help but think that the spirit of God has been at work here, setting up the circumstances which will eventually lead to the manifestation of God's son.

## Luke 1:11-17

Zechariah has a vision in the Temple. He sees an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar. We can put aside all our modern Christmas notions of youthful, female angels with wings and halos. For in the Hebrew tradition, angels were usually quite ordinary-looking

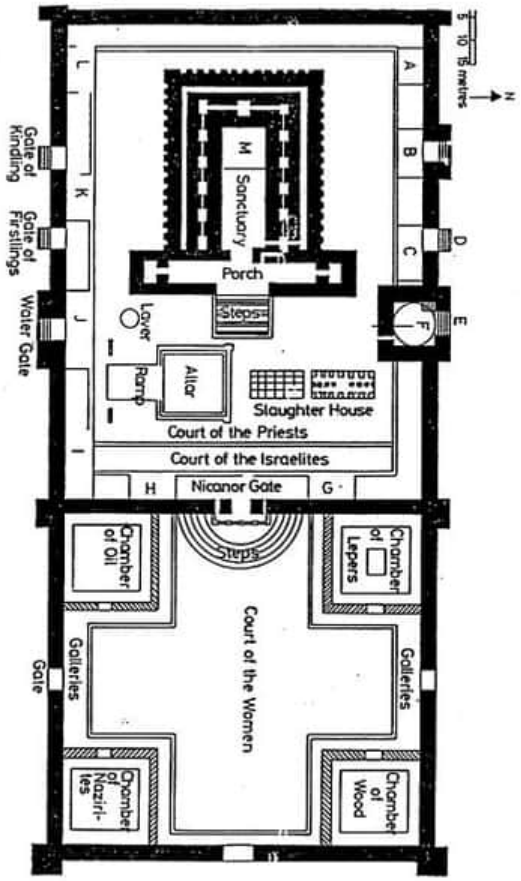


Model of the *Second Jerusalem Temple*
As It May Have Looked During Jesus' Time

figures who were often mistaken for adult males. They did not have wings like birds and most often there was nothing extraordinary about their physical appearance.

Whether one believes in the supernatural reality of angels or not, one thing seems to be clear. They were most commonly mentioned in the early Hebrew world at times when God was believed to be too holy and too majestic to have direct contact with human beings. Thus, these

angels were thought to bridge the great gap between God's spiritual dominion and our earthly world. Essentially these angels were seen as God's soldiers or messengers who loyally performed God's deeds and spoke God's solemn words on earth.




Interior of the Second Temple

Today it seems that many Christians are quite comfortable with the idea of God's own spirit being directly involved in our world. Generally speaking, God is not believed to be so remote today that there is a need for such spiritual intermediaries. That may be a reason why more is not said about angels in our modern day.

At any rate, the angel bears startling news for Zechariah. Not only will Zechariah's wife bear a child, a miracle in itself, but that child will play a critical role in the religious destiny of the Hebrew people. That child will prepare the way for the long-awaited Jewish Messiah.

It seems that as well as praying for his people, Zechariah has also been praying for God to lift the stigma of childlessness from himself and his wife. But as we shall see, Zechariah's prayer appears to have been only half-hearted. For when the answer to his prayer is revealed in its full

glory and according to God's divine plan, Zechariah becomes filled with doubt. At the end of this passage, the angel describes the attributes of this son. In the spirit and power of the Old Testament prophet, Zechariah's son will "make ready a people prepared for the Lord"–the "Lord" meaning Jesus.

## Luke 1:18-25

With this account of Zechariah, Luke introduces a theme which reappears frequently in the New Testament. When the Word of God is revealed, people very often disbelieve it. You will recall that this is Zechariah's great day of privilege as a priest in the Temple. We might expect that if anyone would be receptive to God's Word, Zechariah would be and especially at this time. But no, even Zechariah seeks a tangible sign to prove the truth of God's Word, delivered by this angel.

It is curious, but unlike the other Gospels, Luke is quite ready to believe that God physically punishes people. In his book The Acts of the Apostles, Luke implies that God struck both Ananias and his wife Sapphira dead, for their act of lying to fellow members of their Christian community [5:1-11]. In Acts, Luke also claims that an angel of the Lord killed Herod Agrippa, because of Herod's willingness to let people hail him as a god [12:23]. Though less severe, it is along these same lines that Luke depicts God as punishing Zechariah for his disbelief. For until his son is born and named, Zechariah will be both deaf and unable to speak. Ironically, this physical impairment will serve as the sign which Zechariah asked for.

## Luke 1:26-30

Luke makes a point of saying that Nazareth is located in Galilee. Presumably this additional detail was for the benefit of Luke's Gentile readers, who knew very little about the geography of Palestine. It is significant that Joseph is said to be "of the house of David." This David was an ancient King of Israel who ruled nearly 1,000 years before Jesus' birth. Remembered as a great statesman, warrior, and religious hero, this ancient king brought the Hebrew nation into an unprecedented era of prosperity, political power, and peace. Recalling this "golden era," the ancient Hebrew prophets naturally envisioned the longed-for Messiah from God to be a Davidic "son" who would bring to the Hebrew people a kingdom even greater than that of the original King David.

Luke sees that in accordance with God's plan, the birth of Jesus fulfills that ancient prophecy. However, as is clear throughout Luke's Gospel, Luke does not attribute to Jesus any of the warrior characteristics commonly associated both with that ancient King David and the awaited Messianic "son" of David's lineage.

Here's a modern parallel. During the Advent season, modern Christians often read Isaiah 9:2a, 6-7 in their churches, as a prophecy foretelling the coming of Jesus. That passage anticipates the coming of a Messianic king who will have characteristics much like those

attributed to ancient King David. In the modern Advent reading of that prophecy, verses 3-5 are always omitted, presumably because they show the militant aspects of that long expected Messiah. Those omitted verses speak of the “plunder” of war, “the boots of the tramping warriors,” and “garments rolled in blood.”

Let's stop a moment and take another good look at verse 27. It reads, "to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary." The NRSV translation makes it clear that Joseph is being referred to as being of the house of David.

Roman Catholicism has sometimes interpreted this passage in Luke’s original Greek to mean that Mary, as well as Joseph, are both descendants of David. Interpreted in that way, this verse fits in well with the Roman Catholic veneration of the Virgin Mary. However, as virtually all Protestant Bible scholars and even some modern Catholic scholars have indicated, that interpretation of the original Greek passage is mistaken.

In verse 28 the angel Gabriel addresses Mary with these words, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." It is this verse which gave rise to the famous "Ave Maria" prayer of Roman Catholic devotions. The "Ave Maria" begins "Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee." Early biblical translations of verse 28 commonly referred to Mary as being "full of grace."

However, as many modern Biblical scholars believe, the more accurate translation of this verse from the original Greek, is that Mary is simply the "favored one." "Full of grace" can imply that Mary is a spiritually superior individual in her own right. However, "favored one" implies that Mary is important not because of her own virtues, but because God has chosen her to bear the Messiah. That translation fits in well with the long-standing Protestant view of Mary as being simply the earthly mother of Jesus and not the spiritual intercessor of Roman Catholic belief.

## Luke 1:31-38

There is one thing you will notice about this passage right away. Luke draws a sharp contrast between Mary and Zechariah. Whereas Zechariah doubted the angel's words and sought a confirming sign, Mary believes the angel's message to her and graciously yields to it. By this contrast, Luke highlights the virtue of having implicit faith in God's will. You will note the great irony. The "man of God," Zechariah the Temple priest, is the unbeliever; whereas, the young Jewish woman, Mary, is the believer. It is quite possible that Luke intends for his readers to see more than one level of meaning here. For throughout his Gospel, Luke champions both women and the poor.

As the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther once said, there were three miracles at the Nativity, namely: God became human, a virgin conceived, and Mary believed. According to Luther, the greatest of those miracles was that Mary believed.

In verses 32 and 33, the angel tells Mary that her son will be the long-awaited Davidic

Messiah of Hebrew prophecy. In response to the angel's surprising news that she will bear a son, Mary asks, in verse 34, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

We now come to a question which has been a source of great controversy down through the centuries. Was Jesus really born of a virgin? Without a doubt, Luke thought this was the case. Mary's comment about being a virgin and the angel's response that the power of the Most High would overshadow Mary attest to Luke's belief. For Luke the virgin birth is yet another miracle in God's great salvation plan. But here is the curious thing. Even though Luke holds this belief, it is not a major element in his writings. Outside this passage, and with the exception of just one oblique reference in another chapter of his Gospel [3:23], Luke never mentions the virginal conception of Jesus again. For Luke, the virgin birth plays no part in either the ministry of Jesus or in the story of the early years of the Christian Church.

Actually, this is not surprising. For the virgin birth of Jesus likely was not a part of the earliest Christian preaching. With the exception of Luke and Matthew, it is not explicitly mentioned by any other New Testament author. In itself, this lack of corroboration from other early Christian authors does not disprove the virgin birth. However, it does raise this point. This lack of corroboration implies that the question of the virgin birth is not very central to the Christian faith.

It seems that even such an exemplary Christian as the Apostle Paul lived out his entire life of discipleship without knowledge of this question--or at least concern about it. Apparently for Paul and many other early Christians, the real proof of Jesus' divinity came not from any miracle of conception, but rather from the great miracle of Jesus' resurrection. That was the keystone of their faith.

Having said all these things, I will also go on to make these additional observations, as a way of balancing the issue. The fact of the matter is that we cannot automatically discount the possibility that Luke and Matthew were privy to an early Christian tradition about the virgin birth of Jesus which was unknown to the other New Testament authors. After all, it is apparent that those other New Testament authors were also unfamiliar with any traditions concerning Jesus' birth. Furthermore, if such an early virgin birth tradition did exist, it is not impossible that it originated from Mary herself.

Solely as a matter of principle, some Christians automatically reject the virgin birth because such an event would violate the natural laws of our world. On the face of it this may seem like a reasonable position to take. But, as Christians we must be wary of it. For if we begin rejecting things solely for the reason that they violate natural laws, then we also will be obliged to reject the resurrection of Jesus.

It is worth noting that in the early centuries of Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church's view of Mary and her virginity expanded, drawing, in part, from ancient texts which were not included in the Bible, such as the apocryphal Gospels entitled the *Protoevangelium of James* and

the *History of Joseph the Carpenter*. Such books are believed by scholars to have been written after the period of time when the *Gospel According to Luke* and the other books accepted into the New Testament were written. Protestants have generally not considered such later works as authoritative for Christian faith.

By the 4th century AD, many Roman Catholics espoused the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary. That doctrine maintains that Mary was a virgin, not just before the birth of Jesus, but also during his birth and forever after his birth. According to that doctrine, Jesus' birth was so unique and miraculous that through it all, Mary experienced no pain and she remained a virgin physically. In giving birth her hymen was not ruptured; her womb was not opened. Catholic scholars have sometimes used the image of light passing through glass, without breaking the glass, as an analogy to explain how Mary could give birth to Jesus and still remain a virgin.

By the end of the 4th century AD, many Catholics also maintained that even before the angel visited Mary, Mary had taken a vow to remain a virgin for life. Catholics have quoted Mary's words to the angel in verse 34 as support for that view. But that belief and interpretation of verse 34 is not held by most Protestants. In fact, such a vow of celibacy would have been unusual for a woman in ancient Hebrew society, where it was considered a woman's duty to be "fruitful and multiply." As evidence of the importance of that duty, consider the stigma which fell upon both Sarah and Elizabeth for being barren and childless.

In the New Testament Gospels, it is stated in various places that Jesus had brothers and sisters [Mark 3:31-32; 6:3; Matthew 12:46-47; 13:55-56; Luke 8:19-20; John 2:12; 7:3,5]. Most Protestants accept those statements at face value. They believe those individuals were actual children of Mary. However, consistent with its doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Jesus, the Roman Catholic Church interprets those passages in the original Greek to mean that those "brothers and sisters" were really only "cousins" of Jesus.

In verses 36 and 37, the angel also tells Mary that her aged relative Elizabeth, though said to be barren, has also conceived a son, "for nothing will be impossible with God." It is curious that this family relationship between Elizabeth and Mary and between their sons is mentioned nowhere else in Luke or in the New Testament. In fact, some noted modern biblical scholars have questioned the historical accuracy of there being a family connection between John the Baptist and Jesus. It is to be noted that in the *Gospel According to John*, John the Baptist explicitly says that he did not know Jesus before Jesus came to John to be baptized [John 1:31,31]. Those statements seem hard to reconcile with Luke's idea that those two men were related and that their pregnant mothers spent about three months time together prior to their births [1:56].

## Luke 1:39-56

Have you noticed that there is something missing in Luke's Nativity story? Even though Luke depicts Mary as a highly virtuous young woman, Luke gives us no indication that there

could be any shame or embarrassment in Mary carrying a child who is both prematurely conceived and not the offspring of Joseph, to whom Mary is engaged. In fact, in Luke's view Mary and everyone else who knows of her pregnancy are jubilant.

This contrasts strongly with Matthew's account of the Nativity, where the shame of Mary's unexpected pregnancy is so deep that Joseph is on the verge of divorcing her, until an angel intervenes on Mary's behalf. Ignoring the realities of public opinion, which is always ready to "sniff out" a scandal, Luke focuses solely on the sublime joy of this unprecedented, dramatic new development in God's salvation plan. For Luke, Mary is perfectly "in tune" with the spiritual demands of her role as the "favored one" of God.

There is one other thing I should note here. Luke gives us an extensive portrayal of Mary. In contrast, he tells us almost nothing about Joseph. For Luke, Joseph is little more than a faceless actor who cooperates with the unfolding of God's salvation drama. Throughout Luke's entire account of the Nativity, Joseph is just a name, a means of linking Jesus to the royal lineage of David, and a silent companion for Mary in Bethlehem.

In this passage we see yet another instance of God's miraculous intervention in the lives of the Nativity figures. Having hidden herself away for five months, pregnant Elizabeth knows nothing of Mary's good news. Yet now, when Mary comes to Elizabeth's house and greets her, the fetus in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy. As Luke says, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit at this moment, such that she is instantly knowledgeable of Mary's situation and its divine significance.

In verse 42, Elizabeth exclaims "with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Again we need to make this point. Mary is called "blessed" not because she is a spiritually superior individual in her own right. She is called "blessed" because she has been chosen by God to give birth to the Messiah. It is worth noting that later in this Gospel [11:27-28], Luke depicts Jesus as mildly rebuking a woman in a crowd who refers to Jesus' mother as "blessed."

In verse 46, Mary begins her famous soliloquy which has been termed the "Magnificat." As scholars have long recognized, this "Magnificat" is modeled after the prayer-poem of Hannah [I Samuel 1:11; 2:1-10] and other assorted passages from the Old Testament. Down through the centuries Mary's "Magnificat" has often been set to music. This is no surprise, for as many scholars believe, this "Magnificat" may also have been an early Jewish-Christian hymn, which Luke carefully fitted in his Nativity account.

There are several important themes expressed in the "Magnificat." But the one I want to focus on is this. The "Magnificat" emphasized Luke's apparent belief that in coming to our world, the Messiah will care for the disenfranchised, the poor, and the oppressed. Notice verses 51-53. After declaring that God has regarded her own low estate, Mary gives this description of the Messiah. He has "scattered the proud." He has "brought down the powerful from their thrones."

He has "lifted up the lowly." He has "filled the hungry with good things." And he has “sent the rich away empty."

You may wonder at the past tense being used in these declarations. But they fit into Luke's purpose well. For as Luke believed, once Mary became pregnant, according to God's purpose, all these things were inevitable. Once set into motion, God's divine plan of salvation would not be side-tracked or defeated, no matter how great the human opposition to it. Remember Luke's belief, noted here, that the Messiah came to aid the poor and the oppressed, for we will see this belief emerge again as a dominant theme in Luke's Nativity account.

## Luke 1:57–66

Luke shifts the focus back on Elizabeth, and again we see the supernatural influence of God on human affairs. In addition to the miracle of giving birth to a child in her old age, Elizabeth departs from the long-standing tradition of naming children after family members. Instead, Elizabeth demands that her child be named "John," a name not in her family.

You will recall that Zechariah has been both deaf and unable to speak since the day of his encounter with the angel in the Temple. Realizing that Zechariah cannot hear his wife's choice of a name, the attendants at this rite of circumcision are astounded when Zechariah also insists on that name “John” for their child. It is strange enough that both parents came to that same conclusion separately. But at the moment Zechariah confirms this name for his child, his impairment is miraculously cured. The word spreads about these strange happenings, and those who hear of them quickly realize that God has been responsible for them. Realizing that, people draw back in fear and wonder at the spiritual significance of this newborn child who is named "John," which in Hebrew means "God's gracious gift."

## Luke 1:67-80

Zechariah, whose tongue has been freed, bursts forth in a prophetic soliloquy, commonly referred to as the "Benedictus." Like Mary's "Magnificat," Zechariah's "Benedictus" is a compilation of Old Testament passages. Very likely it was first composed as an early Jewish-Christian hymn. In the "Benedictus," Zechariah begins by praising God for God’s faithfulness in bringing the ancient Messianic prophecies to pass. Zechariah goes on to echo the angel's words that Zechariah's own son will be the one who prepares the way of the Lord. Zechariah then ends his prophetic utterance by declaring that God's Messiah will bring to God’s people "the knowledge of salvation," the "forgiveness of their sins," and guidance into the "way of peace."

Luke brings the first chapter of his Nativity story and Gospel to a close with this comment. According to God's purpose, Zechariah's son will live in the wilderness, until the time comes when he will fulfill his special role in God's salvation plan for the world.

## Luke 2:1-5

You will note that Luke makes a special effort to set the Nativity story within world history. For Luke, the birth of Jesus is no mere legend. Rather, it is a real event which happened at a specific time and place in human history. As modern historians well know, back in this general time period there really was a Roman Emperor named Caesar Augustus. There really was a Governor of Syria named Quirinius.

Luke places Jesus' birth in history and he indicates that God even used the Roman Emperor as the unwitting instrument of God's great salvation plan. As Luke tells the story, because Caesar Augustus called for people to be registered for the purpose of paying taxes, Joseph and Mary are forced to go to the very town in Palestine where ancient Jewish prophecy expected the Messiah to be born. The great Roman Emperor over "all the world" has unknowingly set the scene for the coming of the one who is even greater than himself, namely, the Savior of all the world. Joseph and Mary had to travel a distance of about seventy miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

Luke views Jesus' birth as a real historical event. But there are some difficulties in his placement of that event in history. At the beginning of his Nativity account, Luke speaks in broad terms, saying that Zechariah was a priest "in the years of King Herod of Judea" [1:5]. The implication is that Luke's subsequent accounts of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus took place in that period too. Matthew, in his Nativity account, also indicates that Jesus was born during Herod's reign. Historians know that Herod died in 4 BC.

The problem then comes with Luke's mention of Quirinius. For, contrary to what Luke seems to imply, Quirinius was not the Governor of Syria during Herod's reign. Quirinius held that position years later, beginning in 6 AD.

Another historical difficulty is the census which Luke describes. Historians do not know of any such census having taken place in the period before Herod's death, as Luke implies. However, it is known that Quirinius ordered a registration in Judea in 6 AD for the purpose of taxation. That registration was notorious for it provoked an uprising of Jewish rebels which was put down brutally by Rome.

Perhaps Luke's mistakes about Palestinian history came about because he was a Gentile, and not a Jew familiar with that history which had taken place so many decades earlier?

A significant historical situation around the time of Jesus' birth which Luke does not mention is that after the death of Herod in 4 BC there was also another uprising of Jewish rebels. That uprising led to thousands of Roman troops being sent in to subdue Galilee. Those troops enslaved inhabitants of the Galilean city of Sepphoris, burned that city down, and also crucified about 2,000 male rebels on crosses set up on main roads out of that city as a terrifying warning to others who might also be inclined to resist the Roman occupation of their country.

Neither Luke nor other Bible authors mentioned Sepphoris. But, that city likely played a significant role in the lives of Jesus and his parents. I say that because Sepphoris was less than four miles away from Nazareth. Given that closeness, it seems very likely that Jesus and his parents would have been very aware of Sepphoris' grim history and how very dangerous it could be for anyone to defy Rome.

A Main Street of Ancient Sepphoris

Sepphoris began to be rebuilt soon after its destruction. During Jesus' lifetime it grew to become a cosmopolitan city of about 30,000 Gentiles and Jews and it served as Galilee's commercial center. In contrast, it's estimated that Jesus' nearby hometown of Nazareth only had about 400 people living in it then.

Sepphoris was strongly influenced by both Greek and Roman cultures. It's quite possible that Jesus in his earlier years did some work as a carpenter in Sepphoris, where he would have been exposed to those influences.

Bethlehem in Jesus' day was a tiny, insignificant town, about five miles south of Jerusalem. Yet, Bethlehem had two historic claims to fame. First, Bethlehem was the birthplace of David, the great Hebrew king who lived some 1,000 years before the time of Jesus. Second, according to the Old Testament prophet Micah [Micah 5:2-5], Bethlehem was the place where God would someday raise up from the Davidic line, a new and even great ruler for Israel.

Here's a curious thing. According to Micah's ancient prophecy, that new Davidic king is referred to as a shepherd who will bring peace to his flock--the people of Israel. In view of this prophetic imagery, it may be significant that Luke, and only Luke, depicts shepherds as being important figures in the Nativity drama. In contrast, Matthew's account of the Nativity deals not with shepherds, but with wise men. For Luke, it likely is highly symbolic that when Bethlehem's great shepherd-king finally is born, he is first visited and acclaimed by common shepherds from the fields of Bethlehem.

As you see in verse 4, Luke is once again providing additional geographical details for his Gentile readers. In contrast, a Jew would not need to be told that Nazareth was in Galilee or that Bethlehem was in Judea.

## Luke 2:6-7

Notice that Luke refers to Jesus as Mary's "firstborn" son. The interpretation of this term has long been disputed by Protestants and Roman Catholics. In the Protestant view, Luke's use of "firstborn" implies that Mary gave birth to other children later. Thus Jesus is the first of several

offspring.

In contrast, the Catholic view is that Luke uses "firstborn" only in the sense that Mary had no other children before Jesus, thus signifying that Jesus was entitled to all the privileges Jewish society accorded to the first or only son in a family. As I noted earlier, Roman Catholic doctrine maintains that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life. In contrast, most Protestants accept at face value the Gospel passages which speak of Jesus having “brothers and sisters.”

Take a look at the latter part of verse 7. According to the New Revised Standard Version translation, the baby Jesus is laid "in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." Before modern Biblical scholarship this used to be translated, "because there was no room for them in the inn." Actually there is quite a difference between those two translations, between there being "no room" and "no place" for them in the inn.

According to modern scholarship, the problem was not that the inn was full. Rather, the problem was that there was no suitable place in the inn for a pregnant woman or an infant. One line of thought is that these early inns were virtually open court-yards, which would allow a woman in labor no privacy. A related line of thought is that because child-birth involved ritual uncleanness in the Jewish religion, Mary's presence in the inn would have been very awkward both for herself and for the other guests.

The traditional Christmas image is that of a nasty old innkeeper callously barring the door of his packed inn to Mary and Joseph. Of course, Luke tells us very little about this inn and certainly nothing about any innkeeper. The nasty old innkeeper is just a bit of Christmas legend. But here's the point of the more accurate, modern translation. In contrast to the traditional image, if there was an innkeeper and he found a private stable for Mary to give birth in, he probably was doing Mary a great kindness, considering the circumstances.

## Luke 2:8-20

In verse 8, you will notice that the shepherds are out in the field at the time of Jesus' birth. Though seemingly insignificant, this little detail gives us a clue as to Luke's understanding of when Jesus was born. Apparently in Bethlehem's climate, shepherds were usually out in the fields at night with their flocks from March to November only. Many modern biblical scholars are inclined to think that Jesus likely was born in the spring.

In the 3rd century AD, some Christians began celebrating Jesus' birth on January 6–our modern Epiphany. In fact, the Armenian Church still celebrates Jesus' birth on that day. However, in the 4th century AD it became customary among most Christians to celebrate Christmas on December 25.

There seem to be two basic reasons why early Christians chose that date. First, it was believed back then that the Creation of our world took place on the Spring Equinox. Thus, it

seemed logical that the “new Creation,” which the birth of Jesus represented, must have taken place on the Winter Solstice. And, the Julian calendar used in that early period placed the Winter Solstice on December 25.

Second, that Winter Solstice date had long been associated with pagan Sun festivals and the births of numerous pagan gods. By associating the birth of Jesus with that date, early Christians invested it with a new and highly significant meaning, which eventually replaced those old meanings in people’s thinking and Solstice holiday practices. Historical accuracy was not a primary concern in the early Christian Church's decisions as to when its holidays, including Christmas, would be celebrated.

Luke tells us that the good news of Jesus' birth is first announced to shepherds. As I mentioned earlier, this may well be related to the prophet Micah's image of the Messiah as being the shepherd-king. But very likely there is also another important level of meaning here. Our modern sentimental images of shepherds tend to portray them as noble and gentle folk. We even have a Christmas song which speaks of a "tender shepherd."

However, it would be more accurate to think of these Palestinian shepherds as "rough and ready" men, generally poor, who were often despised by the respectable Jews of their day. It has been said that these shepherds of the field were not always the most honorable people and that their occupation tended to make them lax in observing the Jewish Law.

You will recall that in her "Magnificat," Mary portrays the Messiah as having "scattered the proud" and "lifted up the lowly." This is a prominent theme throughout Luke's Gospel. For in Luke's view, God's great salvation plan was enacted for all people, but especially for the poor and those who are considered outcastes.

Dramatically symbolized by these shepherds and the humble manger, Luke's Nativity story is immersed in poverty. But consider this sharp contrast. In Matthew's account of the Nativity there is no humble manger. And instead of shepherds, it is wise men bearing great gifts of wealth who first visit and acclaim the Christ child.

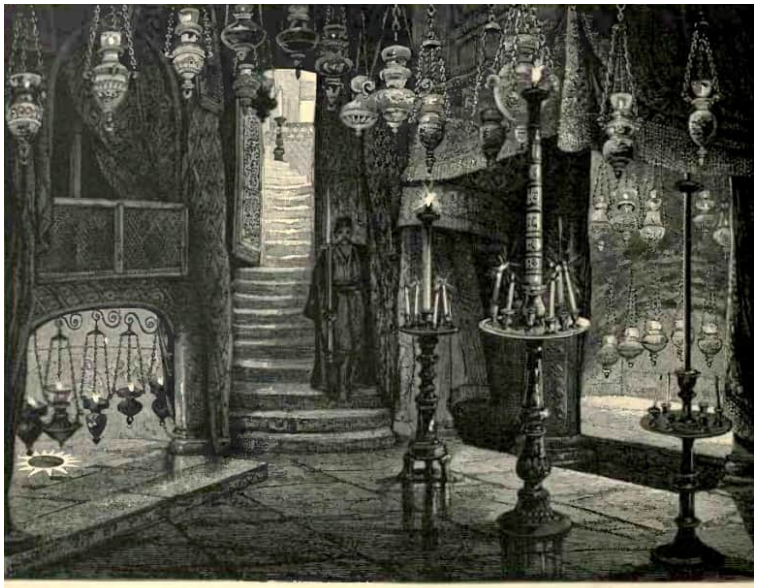
In America we tend to think of such a manger as a kind of wooden crib. However, mangers in ancient Israel were usually large, hollowed-out rocks which animals ate from. Also, there is no mention of a stable in Luke’s account, though its existence is often assumed because of the presence of a manger. In fact, the site in Bethlehem traditionally associated with Jesus’ birth is a cave, which is covered by the Basilica of the Nativity.

A Stone Manger
Like Those in Jesus’ Day

Christians have associated that cave with Jesus' birth since at least 135 AD. About that time, Roman Emperor Hadrian tried to obliterate that cave by planting a forest over it. But that had the unintended result of preserving that cave for future centuries. In 336 AD, after Christianity had become a legal religion in the Roman Empire, the present Basilica of the Nativity was built over that cave.

Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem

The cave beneath the Basilica of the Nativity is often called the Grotto of the Nativity. It is beneath the church's choir and covered with marble. The Grotto is forty feet long, twelve feet wide, and ten feet high. A recessed area on one side of the Grotto is the site traditionally associated with Jesus' birth. The recessed area on the opposite side is associated with Jesus' manger.



CHAPEL OF THE NATIVITY, IN THE CRYPT OF THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY, BETHLEHEM.
The star within the grotto on the left marks "the Place of the Nativity;" on the right is the Altar of the Adoration of the Magi.

A fourteen point, silver star on the floor, known as The Star of Bethlehem, marks the supposed spot of Jesus' birth. The points on that star represent the fourteen stations of the cross in Roman Catholic tradition. The center of that star is open, allowing one to touch the actual limestone floor of that cave. Ironically, the theft of that star in 1847 AD was a precipitating cause of the subsequent Crimean War, which pitted the Russian Empire against the British, French, and Ottoman Empires, and the Kingdom of Sardinia. That star was subsequently replaced.

Traditional Site of Jesus' Birth
Grotto of the Nativity

In the 16th century AD, Arab Christians in Bethlehem made that church's entry door much smaller, in order to keep Turkish military troops from irreverently riding their horses and camels through the church. That door then became known as the Door of Humility. It is so low that most adults have to bend to pass through it. That door is said to be like the Christian faith itself, for one either has to bend in humility or be a child in order to enter it.

Door of Humility
Basilica of the Nativity

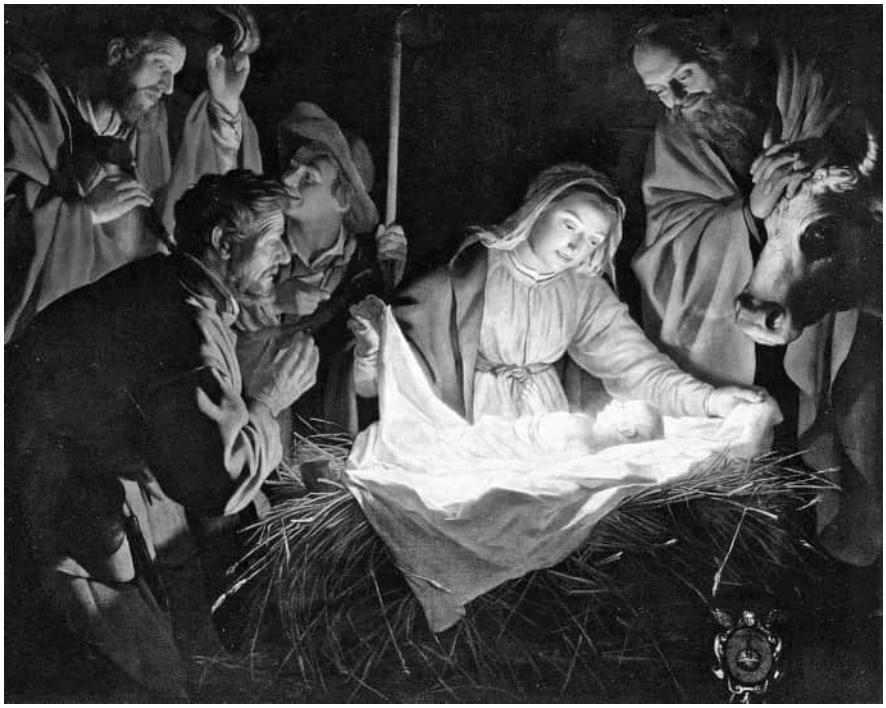
In our modern Christmas celebrations, angels are usually depicted as young females who bear wings and halos. But that's not how the Hebrews of Jesus' day usually thought of angels. They usually thought of angels as quite ordinary-looking figures, who often were mistaken for adult males. It was believed then that a host of angels surrounded the heavenly throne of God, like the star spangled heavens. As you will notice in verses 13 and 14, Luke says that there

suddenly appeared to the shepherds "a multitude of the heavenly host" praising God and proclaiming peace on earth among those whom God favors.

We should not miss Luke's point here. The birth of Jesus is not only a joy to the world, it is also a joy to God. The heavens virtually ring with God's joy, which is proclaimed by these angelic messengers from God. God's great plan of salvation is reaching its climax. God's first great act was to create the world. That creation is now fulfilled by God's new creation, namely, the birth of God's son into our world.

For Luke, the birth of Jesus is a localized event in human history. But it is not only that. It is also an act of God's creative power and glory, which shakes the foundations of both earth and heaven. With this birth, earth and heaven will never be the same again. According to God's eternal purpose, the glory of God in its fullness and humankind's true peace are finally revealed.

The heavenly host proclaims this good news to the shepherds. And then, in verse 20, after seeing the Christ child the shepherds themselves take up this angelic chorus, "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." Thinking of this scene, I am reminded of the hymn "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear." At first the "world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing." But then, "the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing." As Luke seems to say, at the time of this birth, heaven and earth are united in joy, as never before.



*Adoration of the Shepherds*
Gerard van Honthorst, 1622

## Luke 2:21-24

According to Luke, even though this young child is God's son, he and his parents still need to accommodate themselves to the usual laws and observances of Judaism.

I'll digress here to note this difference. The fact is that some early Christians had a strange way of interpreting the basic Christian belief that Jesus was God's son. Those Christians maintained that when God's son came to earth, he came only in the form of a spirit, just like his Father. As they said, while Jesus was on earth he only "appeared" to have a human body and he only "appeared" to participate in our earthly, human life with all its problems and limitations. That early belief has been called Docetism, from Greek words meaning "to seem." Many early Christian Gnostics held this belief. It fit well with their basic philosophical view that all matter is evil.

Early Christian Docetists maintained that this totally spiritual Jesus was never hungry, thirsty, or tired. They said that Jesus never really suffered on the cross, as such bodily suffering was only an illusion. They maintained that Jesus' eyes never blinked, his feet never left any footprints, and from moment to moment he alternately appeared to be very young or very old, very short or with a head reaching to heaven.

The early Christian Church strongly affirmed that Jesus was God's son. At the same time it firmly rejected as preposterous, any assumption that Jesus was only a spirit on earth. In sharp contrast to such ghost-like portrayals, all the New Testament writers, including Luke, are adamant in depicting Jesus as a real flesh-and-blood human being who participates in virtually all the usual dimensions of human existence. In fact, presumably to counteract Docetistic thinking, the author of the *Gospel According to John* explicitly proclaimed in his Prologue that "...the Word became flesh and lived among us" [John 1:14]. Note that word "flesh."

All the New Testament writers portray Jesus as a real human being whose life is lived within the context of a certain time, place, and cultural setting. Of course, the Gospel writers highlight Jesus' supernatural ability to perform wondrous miracles and signs. But never do they view this supernatural ability as a denial of Jesus' basic humanity.

In his Nativity story, Luke maintains that Jesus was virginally conceived. Without a doubt, Luke sees this as a great miracle from God. But even as great as this miracle is, Luke does not see it as pre-empting Jesus' humanness. For throughout his Nativity story and Gospel, Luke repeatedly portrays Jesus as a real human being, who is subject to all the normal human experiences, such as hunger, tiredness, grief, suffering, and death.

As Luke indicates, when Jesus emerges from his mother's womb, he is not a miniature version of a mature adult. Rather he is a tender infant who, like all human infants, will have to progress through the normal stages of human maturation. Along with the other Gospel authors, Luke insists upon the humanness of God's son. Also, it is with this essential understanding that

Luke portrays the child Jesus as being subject to the religious traditions and rituals of his day.

Returning to our text, you will note that Mary's child is circumcised like all Jewish males in his day and ours. As Luke indicates, at this time the child receives the name "Jesus," which was chosen for him by God even before the child's conception. It is not insignificant that the name "Jesus" literally means "the Lord is salvation." Soon afterwards, the child and his parents travel to the Temple at Jerusalem to undergo yet another obligatory Jewish rite. There is considerable symbolism here. For once again, Luke connects Jesus' life to the Temple, the very heart and center of Jewish faith.

Luke indicates that Jesus and his family must undergo only one traditional religious ceremony at the Temple. But as biblical scholars maintain, Luke is confused here. Possibly because Luke is a Gentile and not a Jew, he has mistakenly combined into one, what actually were two separate and distinct Jewish rites of this time. According to scholars, Luke has combined ancient Judaism's traditional rite of Redemption with its rite of a mother's Purification.

The traditional Jewish rite of Redemption involved the following. From the teachings of the Old Testament, it was commonly believed that a first born son had a special obligation to serve the Lord as a priest. However, this special obligation could be avoided if the child's parents paid a sum of money to the Jerusalem Temple, anytime after the child was a month old. In Jesus' day this rite of Redemption was quite common and quite acceptable, particularly as the only children actually raised to be priests then, were those from the Jewish group known as Levites. Jesus was not a Levite.

The second traditional Jewish rite pertained to the purification of the mother. Again according to Old Testament teachings, any woman who gave birth to a child was considered religiously "unclean." If she gave birth to a male child, she was considered "unclean" for forty days. If she gave birth to a female child, she was considered "unclean" for eighty days. After the appropriate number of days, the new mother was expected to present herself at the Temple with a sacrificial offering, that she might be religiously purified.

Apparently Luke has confused these two separate ceremonies. But even so, he has provided us with a symbol. Look at verse 24. As Luke indicates, the sacrificial offering of Mary was either "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." According to Jewish law, this was the offering a poor woman could bring to the Temple for her purification. In contrast, a rich woman was expected to bring a lamb for sacrifice. As with the rough shepherds of the field and the humble manger, Luke is again making the point that the Nativity of Jesus takes place within the context of poverty.

## Luke 2:25-35

Here Luke continues his theme that the Nativity of Jesus takes place according to God's plan. Simeon is a devout Jew and presumably an old person. Like Zechariah, like Mary, like the

shepherds, Simeon has been the recipient of a special message from God. He has been told that before he dies he will see the long-awaited Messiah of Jewish expectation. This revelation to Simeon is particularly dramatic, when we consider how many leading figures of the Old Testament fervently believed in the promised Messiah, but nevertheless died without seeing him. What was denied to Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Moses and so many other Jews, has been revealed to this pious Jew Simeon.

There is something else you will note about God's salvation plan. As Luke indicates, it is the Holy Spirit which has brought Simeon to the great Temple at the exact moment when he can meet the Christ child. In Luke's view, this is no mere coincidence or accident.

Beginning at verse 29, Simeon enters into what has been commonly called the "Nunc Dimittis." It has been named that after the first two words of this text in Latin. Like Mary's "Magnificat" and Zechariah's "Benedictus," the "Nunc Dimittis" may well have been an early Christian hymn which Luke has fitted into this scene. As scholars have indicated, much of the "Nunc Dimmitis" may have been drawn originally from the Old Testament book of Isaiah, chapters 40-55.

There are two important things to note about the "Nunc Dimittis." First, look at verse 32. The point is being made that the Jewish Messiah has come not only for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles. This is a significant departure from the usual Jewish messianic hope. Yet it is very much in keeping with Luke's belief that God's salvation plan is for all the world, for Jews and Gentiles alike.

Second, look at verses 34 and 35. As Simeon indicates, this child will cause a division among the Jewish people. Not everyone in Israel will accept this child as the Messiah. In fact, some will oppose him, to the point where even the child’s own mother, Mary, will be given cause to suffer. Again, this is a significant departure from the usual Jewish messianic hope. For in a veiled way, Luke is referring here to Jesus' eventual death as a martyr.

The popular Jewish hope for the Messiah was that he would be triumphant, a victor over all the forces which opposed Israel. But here, as Luke indicates for the first time, this Messiah will suffer. The idea of a suffering Messiah was strange and also an offense to many Jews.

Because many Jews in Luke's day could not believe in a suffering Messiah, they also could not believe that the crucified Jesus was truly God's Son. As the Apostle Paul himself said, this notion of a suffering Messiah was a real "stumbling block" to Jews [I Corinthians 1:23], a major cause of their rejection of Christianity as the fulfillment of ancient Judaism. Yet, as we see in this passage from Luke, at the time of Jesus' birth it is none other than a devout Jew, Simeon, who prophesies the forthcoming suffering of this child, God's Messiah.

## Luke 2:36-38

It is a characteristic of Luke that he often provides two witnesses to important events in his Gospel. For example, whereas the other synoptic gospels, Mark and Matthew, speak of only one angel at Jesus' empty tomb at Easter, Luke speaks of two angels being present. In the Jewish legal system two witnesses were required to establish certain facts. Presumably Luke was aware of that practice.

Thus, especially here, as his Nativity story draws to a close, Luke is careful to provide the testimony of two persons, not just one person, as to the significance of this child. Notice these parallels. Like Simeon, the prophetess Anna is in the Temple at the exact time and spot where she can meet the Christ child. Again, Luke would have us believe that this is no accident, but rather an act of God's leading. Also, like Simeon, Anna is a devout Jew. Luke tells us that she worshiped at the Temple, "with fasting and prayer night and day." Finally, just like Simeon, Anna bears witness that this child Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah of Hebrew prophecy.

Given Luke's special sensitivity to women throughout his Gospel, it may be significant that one of his witnesses here is a woman. But whether that is the case or not, the point remains that two devout Jews in their mature years are bearing witness to this child as the true fulfillment of all Jewish hopes.

## Luke 2:39-40

Compare Luke’s summary statement after the birth of John the Baptist [1:80] with his summary after the birth of Jesus [2:40]. The two statements are similar. But there is this noticeable difference. In speaking of the child Jesus' subsequent growth, Luke is careful to note that he is "filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him." As Luke would have his readers understand, everything about this child is of God. Both the birth of this child and his future are blessed by God, for Jesus’ appearance on earth is part of the most significant chapter in God's great salvation plan for the world.

Luke's Nativity story essentially ends here. However, some scholars see that story as continuing for another eleven verses to the end of chapter 2. I won't analyze those additional verses. But I will say this. Those eleven verses contain the story of Jesus who, at the age of 12, is in Jerusalem’s great Temple again. Mistakenly left there by his parents, young Jesus is conversing with the teachers of the Temple. When Jesus’ anxious parents come to retrieve him, Jesus innocently says to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

It is worth nothing that this story occurs only in Luke's Gospel. Once again Luke is making the point that he emphasized throughout his Nativity story. He wants his readers to see that this child Jesus is truly the Son of God, the fulfillment of the ancient Jewish hope for the coming of God’s Messiah.

# The Gospel According to Matthew (1-2:23)

Can you imagine attending a Christmas Nativity pageant in which there was no Roman census, no journey to Bethlehem, no inn, no manger, no shepherds, and no heavenly host singing "Glory to God in the highest heaven"? In viewing such a Nativity pageant you might feel a little bit cheated. In fact, such a mangerless, shepherdless pageant might not seem at all to you like a proper portrayal of the first Christmas. But here's the thing. Within our New Testament there is an account of Jesus' birth which mentions none of those things.

Our Nativity pageants might seem quite barren without these vibrant symbols of Christmas. But the fact of the matter is this. Even without those dramatic symbols, there is still plenty of reason to believe that the birth of Jesus was one of the most important events in human history. There is still plenty of reason to believe that in the coming of this child Jesus, God was fulfilling God's ancient plan for the world's salvation.

Thus far we have studied the Lucan version of the Nativity story, the version our Christmas Nativity pageants follow most closely. But now we will turn to the other version of the Nativity, which is found in the *Gospel According to Matthew*. Although not nearly as long as Luke's account, Matthew's version of Jesus' birth is every bit as significant, dramatic, and colorful.

Tradition says that the author of Matthew's Gospel was Matthew the disciple of Jesus. But, most modern biblical scholars feel that is not likely. Many believe Matthew was a Hellenized Jew who lived outside Palestine, in the midst of Gentiles and Greek culture. Matthew wrote his Gospel in Greek and he quotes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, not from the original Hebrew version of it. The majority of Jews in Matthew's day lived in lands outside Palestine, where they often adopted Greek names and clothing. Virtually every major city in the Roman empire of that time had Jewish synagogues.

We should note that Matthew differs from Luke in some important ways. Matthew was a Jew, not a Gentile like Luke. And unlike Luke's focus on a pagan Gentile audience, Matthew likely aimed his Gospel at a mixed group of Greek speaking Jews and Gentiles who valued Judaism and accepted Jesus as the long awaited Jewish Messiah. Whereas Luke was concerned to evangelize and raise the esteem of Christianity in pagan eyes, Matthew's purpose was to teach his readers the religious and moral requirements of living a life of faith which was obedient to Christ.

Matthew has been called the most "Jewish" of all the Gospels. The reason for that is that Matthew seems to approach Christianity from a distinctly Jewish perspective.

First, in accordance with Judaism's emphasis on the observance of certain moral and religious laws, Matthew is very concerned to give his readers definite guidelines by which to live. For example, it is Matthew's Gospel which gives us the fullest and most carefully worked-out

renditions of the Sermon on the Mount, The Lord's Prayer, and the Beatitudes.

Second, Matthew shows numerous parallels between the great Moses of Judaism and God's son Jesus. Moses delivered the Hebrew people from their bondage in Egypt and brought Judaism its precious Law, the Ten Commandments. In Matthew's view, Jesus delivers the world from its bondage to sin and has brought to the world the New Law from God. That New Law is found in the many teachings of Jesus. Those parallels begin to be seen in Matthew's Nativity story.

Both Luke and Matthew are in complete agreement that the religion of Jesus the Messiah is the fulfillment of ancient Judaism. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew repeatedly states that an event in Jesus' life takes place to fulfill a prophecy from the Old Testament. Matthew then quotes that prophecy for his readers. Matthew's Gospel is strongly grounded in Judaism.

What I am about to say may sound like a paradox. Although Matthew's Gospel is the most "Jewish" Gospel, it has also been called the most "anti-Jewish." According to estimates, Matthew wrote his Gospel between 80-100 AD. Many scholars believe that Jesus' death and resurrection likely took place in 30 AD.

In the period of 80-100 AD, Judaism was in great flux. In 70 AD, following a Jewish revolt against Rome, the Romans conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Jerusalem Temple. As that Temple and its worship services had long been at the heart of Jewish faith, that loss left Jewish people across the Roman Empire with the need to redefine their faith significantly. At the time Matthew wrote, numerous Jewish groups, such as the Zealots, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and Jews like Matthew who accepted Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, were struggling for dominance within Judaism.

As that struggle continued, Jewish Christians like Matthew were marginalized. For example, early Jewish believers in Jesus continued to worship at synagogues. However, in the period when Matthew wrote his Gospel, some Jewish religious leaders were taking steps to exclude Jewish Christians from their synagogues. Judaism was beginning to distinguish itself from Christianity. And the Pharisees, who eventually were successful in redefining Judaism, seem to have played a major role in making that distinction.

Matthew's Gospel is "anti-Jewish" in the sense that it shows the deep resentment Matthew had against Jewish groups of his day, like the Pharisees, who were rejecting Jesus and Jewish Christians. Matthew treasured the Jewish faith. In Matthew's view, such groups were blindly leading the Jewish faith in the wrong direction. Such resentment is reflected in Matthew's Nativity story where he characterizes all the Jews of Jerusalem as being not glad, but rather "frightened" along with Herod, at the birth of Jesus.

In Matthew's time, Jews sought to convert Gentiles and some Gentiles did fully convert to the Jewish faith. There also were many other Gentiles who sympathized with Judaism, but did

not go that far. They adopted the Jewish faith and its code of ethics and they participated in synagogue worship, but they were not willing to convert to Judaism fully and be circumcised. Those Gentiles were often referred to as "God-fearers," [Luke 7:1-5; Acts 10:1f; 14:1].

As Matthew believed, God sent Jesus to our world as the Jewish Messiah to fulfill God's prophecies and commitments to the Hebrew people. However, in Matthew's view, with the coming of Jesus, faithful Gentiles could now look forward to entering into eternal life in the kingdom of heaven, along with faithful Jews. At the end of his Gospel, Matthew portrays Jesus commanding his followers to make disciples of all nations, extending the faith to Jews and Gentiles alike [Matthew 28:19]. The irony is that the religion of Jesus the Messiah, which Matthew saw so strongly rooted in the history of the Hebrew people and Judaism, soon became a religion of Gentiles largely, not Jews.

Before turning to our text, there is something else I will mention. Like Luke, Matthew seems to have been an arranger and editor of traditions about Jesus which he had received. As with Luke, we should read Matthew's Nativity story as a statement of faith, not as a precisely accurate historical account. Although based on a stratum of historical truth, the Nativity stories of both Luke and Matthew are much more concerned to show the spiritual significance of God's son being born into human history.

## Matthew 1:1-17

As you can see, the first verse of this Gospel is followed by a long list of names, which Matthew presents as the genealogy of Jesus.

It has been said that of all the Gospels, Matthew's Gospel is the most carefully arranged. That concern for good order has led some scholars to think that Matthew may even have been a Jewish scribe. Jewish scribes were essentially religious lawyers. With great precision they taught and interpreted the laws of Judaism.

Whether Matthew was a scribe or not, his concern for good order leads him to establish exactly who Jesus is, before he tells the story of Jesus' birth. In effect, Matthew gives us Jesus' pedigree, and what a pedigree it is. It includes both the royalty of Israel and many of the great figures in Jewish religious history.

We need to be careful here. For Matthew's understanding of genealogy is not the same as our own. Rather than being a strict genealogy of blood-lines, Matthew's genealogy is more legal in nature. Within the context of Jewish law, Matthew's genealogy establishes Jesus as having the right ancestors to be considered the long-awaited Jewish Messiah.

You will notice that Matthew has divided his genealogy of Jesus into three equal segments, saying that each segment is made up of fourteen generations. This tidy arrangement can hardly be true historically. But it does serve Matthew's purpose well. For with this

arrangement, Matthew wants to indicate that God has been very precise in preparing the world for the coming of God's son, Jesus.

In a sense, Matthew's genealogy is really a demonstration of God's providence and plan of salvation, as it has worked its way through Israel's history. Matthew's genealogy extends from Abraham the great Hebrew Patriarch, to David the great Jewish king, to that climactic moment when Jesus is born. According to Matthew, Jesus' lineage shows that he has a strong and longstanding connection to the Hebrew people.

Here's a curious point. Although Matthew speaks of listing Jesus' descent in three fourteen generation sections, in the last of those sections [after the deportation to Babylon], he only list thirteen names from Jechoniah to Jesus. There is no clear explanation for that. The original text of Matthew is not known to exist. Did a copyist, somewhere along the line, leave out an ancestor?

As we noted earlier, the *Gospel According to Luke* has its own version of Jesus' genealogy [Luke 3:23-38]. Luke's version is substantially longer and different than Matthew's genealogy. Whereas Matthew traces Jesus's lineage back to Abraham, Luke traces Jesus' lineage all the way back to Adam, the supposed father of all the world's people, Jews and Gentiles alike.

There is something else very unusual about Matthew's genealogy. Unlike most genealogies of his day, Matthew has included the names of five women in his list. Over the centuries scholars have been puzzled over Matthew's inclusion of those women in his genealogy of Jesus. It has been noted that the four women in this list other than Mary were all considered to be Gentiles by Jewish tradition. They came from outside Judaism or were married to such a person. In contrast, all the men in Matthew's genealogy were Jews. Also, there was something irregular, even scandalous about the sexual unions of three of those women.

First, in verse 3, Matthew mentions Tamar, a Canaanite. After the death of her husband, Tamar disguised herself as a harlot. In that disguise Tamar met her former father-in-law, Judah, and with him conceived two children. Second, in verse 5, Matthew mentions Rahab, a Gentile. This woman was a harlot in Jericho.

Third, in verse 5 again, Matthew mentions Ruth. Ruth was a Moabite who eventually married into Judaism. Fourth, in verse 6, Matthew mentions the "wife of Uriah," named Bathsheba, who had an adulterous relationship with King David. David arranged for Bathsheba's husband Uriah, the Hittite, to be killed. Bathsheba was an Israelite, but Jewish tradition viewed her as a Gentile, because of her marriage to a Hittite. Fifth, in verse 16, Matthew mentions Mary, of whom Jesus was born.

It seems odd to link those four women with Jesus' mother Mary, who definitely was Jewish. It seems odder still to include those four women in the genealogy of God's son, the Jewish Messiah. But Matthew may have done those things for these reasons.

Matthew likely wanted to show that Jesus had some Gentile ancestors. The idea that the Messiah had some Gentile lineage was compatible with Matthew's belief that Gentiles as well as Jews were included in God's plan of salvation. Likely Matthew also wanted to show that God would use sexual behavior which was irregular, even seemingly scandalous, to accomplish God's ultimate purpose of sending God's Messiah into our world. Such irregularity in Jesus' lineage foreshadowed Mary's conception of Jesus through the Holy Spirit, while she was a virgin and not yet living with the husband to whom she was engaged.

It is worth noting that while Matthew affirms the virgin birth of Jesus, he asserts in his genealogy that Jesus' legal connection back to the royal line of David is through Joseph. However, in his way of wording verse 16, Matthew departs from his usual genealogical formula of linking fathers with sons and carefully avoids calling Joseph "the father" of Jesus. Instead Matthew says, "Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born..."

## Matthew 1:18-21

One thing should be evident right away. In Luke's Nativity story the angel appears to Mary. Here in Matthew's account, the angel appears to Joseph. In a sense the roles are reversed. The Lucan Nativity story focuses on Mary and nearly ignores Joseph, except to give us his name and his relationship to the house of David. In Matthew's Nativity story, Joseph is the prominent figure and Mary is little more than a name.

Throughout Luke's Nativity story there isn't even the slightest suggestion that Mary's conception of Jesus could be considered scandalous. But that's not the case in Matthew's Nativity story! Perhaps because Matthew is a Jew, he is particularly sensitive to the legal ramifications of an engaged Jewish woman becoming pregnant by someone other than the man she is engaged to.

What did it mean to be engaged [or betrothed] in those days? According to Jewish law of that time, girls were considered to reach their majority when they began to menstruate or when they were twelve years and one day old, whichever came first. By the age of twelve years and six months, they were expected to formally exchange marriage vows with a man before two witnesses. At that point the couple would be considered engaged. They did not yet live together, but their marriage was considered a legal reality. In principle, such an engaged girl could still be prepubescent. Usually about a year after their engagement, the husband would take the girl to his family's home, and there they would begin living together as husband and wife with marital relations.

Most often, during the year of engagement a couple was expected not to have sexual relations. But here was a greater sin. If during the engagement year a bride had sexual relations with a man other than the person she was engaged to, it was considered to be adultery.

Apparently this is what Joseph thinks when he first learns that Mary is pregnant. He thinks that Mary has betrayed his trust and committed adultery. In Jewish law a woman suspected

of adultery would be forced to submit to an ordeal. In the absence of any witnesses to her suspected crime, she would be forced to take an oath and then drink a mixture of holy water and dirt, possibly the sweepings from the Temple floor. If the woman was unharmed by this drink she would be acquitted. However, if she swelled up and became sick, she would be judged guilty [Numbers 5:11-31]. The legal punishment for adultery was death by stoning [Deuteronomy 22:23-24].

As Matthew says, Joseph was "a righteous man." Perhaps feeling compassion for Mary, he did not want to subject her to this ordeal and possible death sentence. So Joseph prepared himself to do the discreet thing. Privately before just two witnesses, he would hand Mary a "Writ of Divorce." That was all that was necessary in those days for a man to terminate his marriage [Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Jeremiah 3: 8; Mark 10:4].

Yet, as Matthew indicates, just in the nick of time an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream. That angel tells Joseph that Mary has conceived through the Holy Spirit and that the resultant child shall be called Jesus. Although Matthew does not explicitly say it, we can assume that Joseph is quite relieved to learn that his young bride, Mary, possibly only twelve years old, has not been unfaithful to him.

## Matthew 1:22-25

In verse 22, Matthew signals his readers that these events are not happening by accident. They are part of God's salvation plan as prophesied in the Old Testament scriptures. In the following verse, 23, Matthew quotes the Old Testament passage which he believes foretells these events, namely, Isaiah 7:14. Matthew drew that quote from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, with which he–as a Jew living in the Diaspora [outside Palestine]–was familiar. That Greek translation of Isaiah 7:14 speaks of a “virgin” who shall conceive. However, the original Hebrew version of that passage speaks of a “young woman” who shall conceive and does not necessarily imply that she is a virgin.

Notice in this same passage that the child shall be called “Emmanuel, which means, God with us." It is probably not a coincidence that at the end of his Gospel [28:20], Matthew depicts Jesus as saying these final words to his disciples, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Very likely Matthew wants his readers to realize that Jesus remains “Emmanuel, God with us” after Jesus’ resurrection, as well as at his birth.

Take a good look at verse 25 which says that Joseph "...had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus." The strong implication here is that following the birth of Jesus, Joseph and Mary had a regular marriage relationship. This is in sharp contrast to the Roman Catholic doctrine that Mary remained a perpetual virgin. Later in his Gospel [12:46; 13:55], Matthew explicitly says that Jesus had brothers and sisters. From the Roman Catholic point of view, not the usual Protestant view, those were only cousins of Jesus.

## Matthew 2:1-8

In Luke's Gospel, Mary and Joseph are residents of Nazareth who only come to Bethlehem for a short time, to satisfy a Roman census for the purposes of taxation. In contrast, Matthew appears to know nothing of such a census or journey. The assumption in Matthew's account is that Mary and Joseph are residents of Bethlehem, not Nazareth.

Later, Matthew tells us that Mary, Joseph, and their child move to Nazareth to avoid persecution. But even there the implication is that Nazareth is a remote and unfamiliar place to them.

It's worth noting that along with Luke, Matthew depicts Jesus as having been born at a particular time and place in human history. In fact, both Gospel authors indicate that Jesus' Bethlehem birth took place during the reign of Herod the Great. As historians know, Herod the Great ruled over the Palestine region from 37 B.C. until the time of his death in 4 B.C.

The name "Herod" is frequently mentioned throughout our Gospels. But we should be clear about this distinction. The Herod at the time of Jesus' birth and the Herod referred to at the time of Jesus' ministry and death were two different Herods who ruled in Palestine at different times. Those Herods were father and son, each of whom received his authority to rule from Rome.

"Herod the Great," the Herod at the time of Jesus' birth, had a terrible reputation. Historians know that he even murdered his own wife and some of his own children when it suited his political purposes. As the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus wryly observed, it was better to be Herod's pig than his son. As a Jew, Herod scrupulously avoiding eating pork, but apparently he had no scruples against slaughtering his own family.

As Matthew tells us, "wise men from the East came to Jerusalem." Who were these "wise men," or "magi" in the original Greek of this Gospel? Matthew doesn't indicate that they were kings, as later Christian legend claimed. The idea they were kings may have come from people who later connected Matthew's story with the prophecy in Isaiah 60:1-6. However, considering Matthew's account alone, it seem most likely that these wise men were astrologers or magicians. Very possibly they came to Jerusalem from Persia or Babylonia and likely they were Gentiles, not Jews.

As far back as five hundred years before Christ, the Greek word "Magoi" [Magi] was used to describe priests in Persia who followed the religion known as Zoroastrianism. That religion was based on a prophet in Persia named Zoroaster, who may have lived about 6 BC.

By the time of Jesus, that word Magi had been expanded to include also men of other cultures who were considered mysterious and highly learned, especially in secret and occult arts. Typically Persian and other Magi were skilled in astrology and in interpreting prophecies. Some

also practiced magic. We know Magi existed even decades after Jesus' ministry, because Pliny, the Roman historian, talks about Magi who traveled to Rome in 66 AD, both to honor the Roman Emperor Nero and to deliver their predictions about his rule.

It is possible that Matthew's wise men were Persian Magi who followed Zoroaster. And it is possible that it was a prophecy from Zoroaster which led those Magi to connect that event they witnessed in the heavens with Jerusalem and the birth of the king of the Jews.

The apocryphal gospel called the *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy* is believed to have been written around the 5th-6th century AD. That book is not in our Bible and Christian scholars generally consider it to be a work of fiction, based in part on other apocryphal works. Most Christians do not consider that book to be a reliable source for Christian faith. However, there is an interesting line in that book's account of the Nativity. As it says, "Some magi came to Jerusalem according to the prediction of Zoroaster."

I don't accept material from that relatively late, fictional book as "proof" in any sense. However, if Matthew's Magi actually were Zoroastrian Persians following a Zoroastrian prophecy, it might explain why, prior to arriving in Jerusalem, they apparently did not know the Hebrew prophecy that the Jewish Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

In the centuries after Jesus's birth, a good many Christians believed that the wise men were, in fact, emissaries from Persia and its Zoroastrian religion. That common belief is reflected in an historic event. In 614 AD, Persian troops swept through Palestine, destroying Christian churches. The one church they spared was the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The Persians spared that one Christian church, because on its walls there was a large mosaic which showed the wise men as Persians, dressed in the traditional Persian style of belted tunics, full sleeves, and trousers.

Matthew depicts the Magi who traveled to Jerusalem in a very favorable light. It is of interest, however, that where such figures are mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, they usually are looked upon negatively. Consider, for example, the accounts of Simon Magus [Acts 8:9-24] and the magician Elymas [Acts 13:6-12]. By and large, astrology and magic were sternly rejected by both ancient Judaism and early Christianity. How can one explain Matthew's positive view of the Magi?

One possible answer has to do with the Magi being Gentiles, not Jews. Like the Gentile women in Jesus' genealogy, the wise men may have been a vivid symbol for Matthew of his belief that Gentiles as well as Jews were included in God's plan of salvation. Matthew may have rejoiced that God put a sign in the heavens for even Gentiles to come to God's Messiah Jesus.

Another possible answer refers back to the negative view of astrology and magic mentioned above. In coming to pay homage to Jesus, the wise men could actually have been submitting themselves to him and renouncing their evil arts of astrology, magic, and sorcery.

They could have been acknowledging that even this child of God was greater than all their evil powers combined. Also, the gifts the wise men brought to Jesus could have been their ill-gotten gain from practicing those evil arts, which they were now turning over and dedicating to God's Messiah. This explanation may seem far-fetched. But some early Christian leaders held this view of Matthew's wise men, though it is not clear that Matthew held it.

Another possible answer refers back to the possible Zoroastrian faith of those Magi. In coming to Jesus, those wise men may have been turning from their faith tradition and affirming the superior power and truth of God's new Messiah, Jesus.

The wise men claimed to have seen the star of the Messiah while in the east. Over the centuries there has been considerable debate as to the identity of that star. Was it a dramatic public spectacle like a supernova or a comet? Or was it something more subtle like a conjunction of planets or a particular planet passing through a certain constellation? Those are events which would have special meaning only to astrologers and others who continually watched the skies for such signs. I will consider that star in the next section.

You will note this contrast. The wise men describe Jesus as the "king of the Jews" in verse 2. But Herod the Great is also described as being king of that land and people. As Matthew seems to say, the Christ child has just been born, but already he is in conflict with Jewish authorities in Palestine.

Take a look at verse 3, "When Herod the king heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." Certainly it is an exaggeration to say that "all Jerusalem" was distressed at the news of this birth. But then that exaggeration seems to fit Matthew's purpose. Giving vent to his anti-Jewish feelings, Matthew wants to portray the rejection of Jesus by some Jewish groups, like the Pharisees, as being a total rejection by all Jews in Palestine.

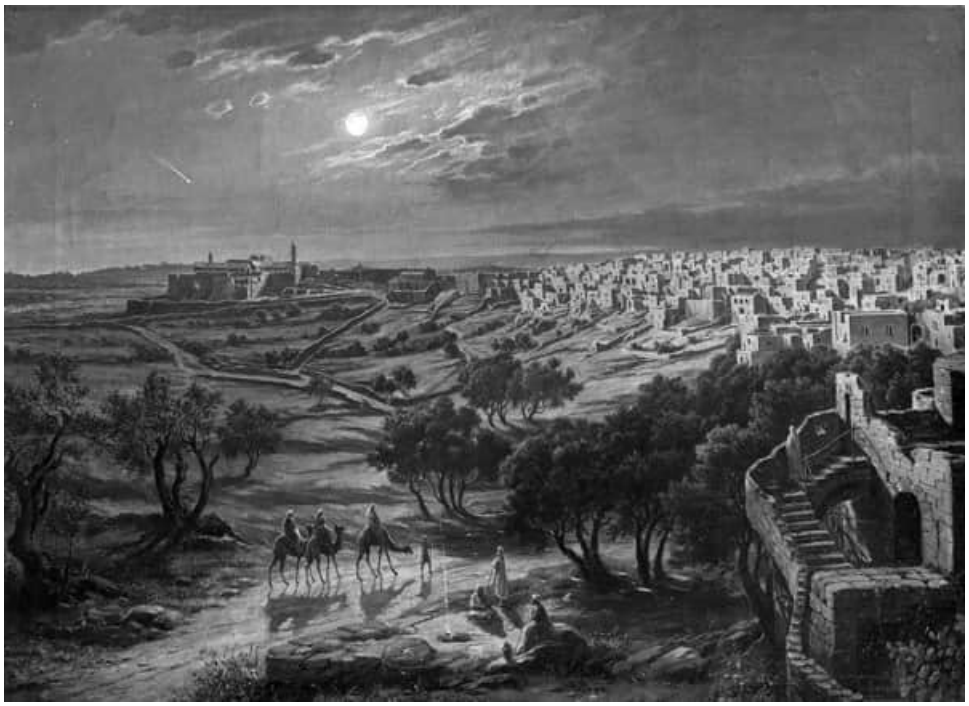
Here is a great irony. When the Jewish Messiah is born, all the Jews of Jerusalem are frightened by what has happened virtually in their "own backyard." However, the Gentile wise men are glad, so overjoyed in fact that they travel a great distance just to worship this child.

In response to Herod's request to know "where the Messiah was to be born," the chief priests and scribes of Jerusalem cite the Old Testament prophecy of Micah [5:2]. That prophecy asserts that Israel's great Messiah king will be born in Bethlehem. This fits Matthew's purpose well. For as Matthew fully believes, the important details of Jesus' life and ministry were foretold in the Old Testament long before Jesus' birth. As I suggested before, the wise men themselves do not seem to be aware of that Hebrew prophecy.

## Matthew 2:9-12

Notice how Matthew portrays the wise men's experience of the star.
–The star rises in the sky and appears to the wise men while they are in the east.

–Then, that star is not visible to them, apparently.
–From prophecy or through other means, the wise men have come to understand that the appearance of that particular star signifies the birth of the "king of the Jews." That understanding–not the star–leads the wise men to travel to Jerusalem, the center of Judaism, to find that new born king.
–Apparently Herod and the citizens of Jerusalem have not seen the star or understood its significance.
–Herod meets secretly with the wise men to learn exactly when the star had appeared, presumably so Herod can ascertain the exact age of the child.
–Herod then sends the wise men to Bethlehem, the town where Micah's prophecy says God's Messiah will be born.
–As the wise men make that journey, a distance of only about five miles, the same star they had seen in its rising in the east reappears to them.
–The star goes before the wise men.
–Then the star stops "over the place where the child was" and the wise men are "overwhelmed with joy."



*View of Bethlehem By Night*, Joseph Langl, by 1920

Scientists know that Halley's comet appeared in 12 BC. They know that a conjunction of Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn occurred in 7 BC. In that Jesus was probably born between 8 and 6 BC, according to modern calendars, many have assumed that the planetary conjunction in 7 BC was the "star" seen by the wise men. However, this is not a certain identification and there are other astronomical theories regarding that star.

One of the challenges in identifying that star is Matthew's claim that the star stopped "over the place where Jesus was"–presumably the house the wise men subsequently entered. One is inclined to ask, how is it possible for a star in the heavens to stop and also point out a single house? Wouldn't a star have to be no more than a few hundred feet above a house to point it out? In fact, that question occurred to John Chrysostom [c. 347-407 AD], an Archbishop of Constantinople. As Chrysostom said in a sermon:

> *How then, tell me, did the star point out a spot so confined, just the space of a manger and shed, unless it left that height and came down, and stood over the very head of the young child?* [Homily 6 on Matthew]

Some modern scholars suspect that Matthew's description of the star pointing out a particular house is more a matter for literary inquiry than astronomical inquiry.

And the question of the star stopping? In 1999, astronomer Michael Molnar proposed a theory about Matthew's star which involved occulations [eclipses] of the planet Jupiter by the Moon in the constellation of Aries in 6 BC and two instances that same year when Jupiter went retrograde and appeared to be stationary in the sky. The latter could explain the wise men's star "stopping," but Molnar still could give no astronomical explanation for Matthew's description of the star pointing out a single house. All in all, various astronomical theories concerning the identity of Matthew's star are still being debated.

*Homage of the Three Kings to the Holy One*,
Janez Šubic, 1877

You will note that there is no stable and no manger in Matthew's Nativity story. Matthew assumes that Mary and Joseph already reside in Bethlehem, and Matthew implies that the birth of Jesus occurred in their Bethlehem home.

Traditionally the wise men are portrayed as being both kings and three in number. In fact, Matthew does not tell us how many wise men there are. He only mentions that they bring three kinds of gifts to the Christ child: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Down through the centuries elaborate theories have been devised to explain the significance of each of those gifts. But likely Matthew sees a simple meaning in them. All of those gifts are quite valuable, thus they are truly fit for a king such as Jesus, who is "King of the Jews." In contrast, you will note that Matthew says nothing about the wise men bringing such gifts to King Herod.

In Luke's Gospel we saw that poor Jewish shepherds were the first to visit the Christ child. In Matthew's Gospel it is wealthy Gentiles who make the first visit.

In verse 12 you will notice that the wise men are warned in a dream not to return to Herod. This is the second of five instances in Matthew's Nativity story when God intervenes at a critical moment to insure both the welfare of God's son and the fulfillment of God's salvation plan. God's first intervention was at the moment when Joseph was on the verge of divorcing Mary for her presumed adultery.

## Matthew 2:13-15

*The Flight Into Egypt*, Gustave Doré, 1865

In verse 13, an angel warns Joseph in a dream that he should take the child and Mary to Egypt, to escape Herod's efforts to destroy the child. This is the third instance of God's intervention at a critical moment.

In Luke's Nativity story, the angels of the Lord are sometimes depicted as appearing to people while they are fully conscious and awake, for example, to the shepherds as they tend their sheep out in the field. In contrast, the angels of Matthew's Nativity story always appear to people in a dream.

Do you recall the story of Moses in the bulrushes? Moses was born of Jewish parents who were enslaved in Egypt. At that particular time the great Egyptian king [ Pharaoh] had decreed the death of all Hebrew male infants. To save her child's life, Moses' mother secretly put him in a basket in the bulrushes at the edge of a river. Coming along at that time, Pharaoh's daughter discovered Moses and took him into her own household to raise him as a son [Exodus 1-2]. Moses then grew up to become the great liberator of these enslaved Jews. Led by God, Moses brought his people out of Egypt in the miraculous Exodus, an event which is of great importance to the Jewish faith.

As I noted earlier, Matthew sees many parallels between Moses and Jesus, including parallels in their births. In both cases a king is determined to kill Hebrew children. And in both cases, the child special to God is spared.

Of course, it is ironic that Jesus is taken into Egypt, whereas Moses was taken out of Egypt, in order to escape harm. But that actually serves Matthew's purpose well, on two different levels. First of all, it is a strong denunciation of Palestinian based Jewish groups of his day which did not accept Jesus as their Messiah. In effect, Matthew is saying that the Jewish King Herod is equivalent to the wicked Pharaoh, that great enemy of God's purpose. Led by their political king,

the Jewish nation is now seeking to destroy its long-awaited Messiah, rather than embrace him.

Second, the presence of Jesus in Egypt sets the scene for the fulfillment of another Old Testament prophecy. As we see in verse 15, like Moses and like the Hebrew people, Jesus himself will be called "out of Egypt" [Hosea 11:1] to enact God's plan of liberation and salvation.

## Matthew 2:16-18

Matthew gives us the impression that a vast number of children were killed by Herod's troops. Given the small size of Bethlehem at this time, some scholars have assumed, more realistically, that about 20 or 30 children were killed. It is curious that aside from Matthew's account of this slaughter, no other record of it has yet been found. Historical records of that time however, do show that Herod certainly would have been capable of authorizing such a despicable massacre.

According to this passage, Matthew may have believed that Jesus was up to two years of age when the wise men visited him. That might explain the difference between finding the child Jesus in a Bethlehem manger, as in Luke's Gospel, or in a Bethlehem house, as in Matthew's Gospel.

As we note in verses 17 and 18, Matthew again sees the fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy. In ancient Hebrew history, Rachel was the mother of the great Hebrew figures Joseph and Benjamin. In Jeremiah's prophecy [Jeremiah 31:15], Rachel becomes a symbolic figure who weeps over the Hebrew people of the 6th century BC who are carried away into exile by their Babylonian conquerors.

As Matthew seems to say, the great sorrow of that tragic event in Hebrew history was a precursor of this tragic day in Bethlehem. Incidently, ancient tradition held that Rachel was buried in Ramah, a town within a short distance of Bethlehem.

## Matthew 2:19-23

Now for the fourth and fifth times, God intervenes again through a dream. Joseph is told to return to Israel, then later he is told to go to that part of Israel where his son will be safe. Presumably it was Joseph's inclination to return to his home in Bethlehem, just outside Jerusalem. But instead he must take his family to the unfamiliar region called Galilee, in the northern part of Israel.

You will notice that throughout Matthew's Nativity story, Mary is a silent figure. Always God's message comes to Joseph, not Mary. As Matthew indicates, the choice of this town Nazareth is inspired. For it fulfills the words of the prophets, in the sense that God's Messiah "will be called a Nazorean." Obviously, Matthew has some ancient Hebrew prophecy in mind here. But, it is not found in the Old Testament.

There is a sense in which Galilee must have been symbolic for Matthew. For in Jesus' time period, Galilee was quite a bit different from the Jerusalem area. In that period the Jerusalem area served as the center of Judaism and Hebrew culture, whereas, the Galilean region was a cultural melting pot of Jews and Gentiles. In fact, at various times in Galilee's history Jews were a minority population. Also, in sharp contrast to the Jews in Jerusalem, the Jews in Galilee were inclined to adopt aspects of Gentile culture. Also, as I noted previously on pages 14-15, the commercial center of Galilee during the time of Jesus was the city known as Sepphoris, which was greatly influenced by Greek and Roman cultures and located less than four miles from Nazareth.

As Matthew seems to say in ending his Nativity story, as ironic as it may seem, the long awaited Jewish Messiah will not be safe in Jerusalem, the then center of the Jewish faith.

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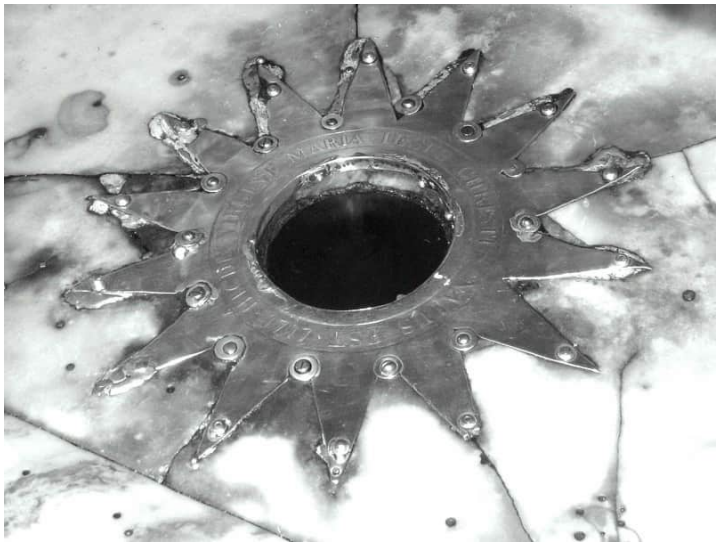
*"Do not be afraid, for see–I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people, to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord."*



*The Star of Bethlehem*
Grotto of the Nativity

# Comparing the Two Gospel Nativity Accounts

| Gospel According to Luke | Gospel According to Matthew |
|---|---|
| Shepherds [poorer Hebrews] | Wise Men [affluent Gentiles] |
| Angels appear to Zechariah, Mary, Shepherds | Angels appear only to Joseph and only in dreams |
| Jesus born in poverty | Jesus receives wealth |
| Baby Jesus found in animal feeding trough [manger presumably in a stable] | Baby Jesus found in a house |
| Mary and Joseph reside in Nazareth, travel to Bethlehem | Mary and Joseph reside in Bethlehem, later relocate to Nazareth as a safe and seemingly new place to live |
| Story takes place at the heart of Judaism with significant events at its great Jerusalem Temple–including baby Jesus' circumcision. | Together with Herod, "all Jerusalem" is frightened at word of Jesus' birth. Rejected by Jerusalem [symbol of official Judaism], baby Jesus and family are forced to retreat to the mixed ethnic region of Galilee, where Gentiles will receive him. |
| Focuses on Mary | Focuses on Joseph |
| All joy, no shame, no fearful escape, no violence | Joy, but initial shame due to conception out of wedlock, hurried escape to Egypt, and Herod's slaughter of Bethlehem children |
| Jesus the new Shepherd-king–in the line of King David | Jesus the new Moses–in the line of King David |

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